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ABSTRACT

By adopting some of the methods used by ethnographic researchers, performance artists/researchers can "step out of" their own culture, providing the necessary distance for the reporting of the event under investigation. Dwight Conquergood uses ethnographic research to be able to "step into" the culture under investigation and gather data about the culture. This methodology is also useful to a specific type of solo performance artist when attempting to step out of and gather data about his/her own culture. Spalding Gray's autoperformances contain a subtext which turns his seemingly entertaining life stories into social commentary on his own culture. Just as ethnographers are using performance as an outlet for their research, some performers are adopting ethnographic techniques used in the preparation of their own performances. Ethnography is used to learn about other cultures; however, when used properly, it can reveal much about the researcher's own culture through the performance of self. (Contains 25 references.) (RS)

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Life as Performance:

Ethnographic Qualities in Performance of Self

Introduction

The rise of experimental theatre in the 1960s succeeded in permanently and radically expanding the field of performance (Schechner Humanism 23). No longer were plays considered the sole source for performance. The field has been expanded to include other means of generating performance, which according to Richard Schechner in his book The End of Humanism, include, but are not limited to, theories, group-created works, performer-created works, performance art, political theatre, workshops and paratheatre, and religious ceremonies as theatre (24).

Performances began to originate from sources other than dramatic texts, which resulted in the field of theatre becoming a smaller sub-group belonging to the larger heading known as performance. Now drama and theatre were being considered from an anthropological, sociological, and ethnological viewpoint. Traditionally, peformance was the point of concentration of theatre scholars and practitioners. Either theatre culminated in a performance of a literary text or the text itself was the focus of the study. However, the rise of experimental theatre brought about the acceptance of performance events that did not surround a literary text. Scholars began to

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investigate everything related to all types of performance, from the traditional play to everyday conversation (Wendt 250).

At first performance studies seemed to be the study of everything related to performance except the actual participation in the event. According to Ted Wendt, in his 1990 article "The Displacement of the Aesthetic,"

> [S]tudents in a "performance studies" course would learn how (as a potential ethnographer, oral historian, anthropologist, or some such behavioral scientist) to study performance as a subject at some remove from their own physical bodies and their own lived experience. (252)

As the field became recognized as a legitimate area of study, students and scholars of performance studies discovered the "performance" aspect of the new discipline. Performance studies became a form of expression and communication. The researcher, whether anthropologist, sociologist, or ethnographist, was also the performer. These scholars used performance as an outlet for communicating their discoveries. Dwight Conquergood can be considered an ethnographer and performance studies scholar--a researcher/performer. He ethnographically studied refugees in inner-city Chicago, collected oral histories and personal narratives of his subjects and then performed them.

Another type of solo performer found within the field of performance studies is the performance artist. These artists use performance as a means of expressing themselves. Their pieces are a

reflection of some part of their inner-selves. The performance can be in various forms, such as an "improvised" monologue or dramatic monologue. Whatever the form, however, performance artists "often play themselves--their own personality or life--not a character, and both plot and narrative are handled in unconventional ways" (Stern 381).

The "texts" of performance art arise from many sources; performers' memory, personal narratives, photographs, or clothing. The artist can perform these "texts" as themselves or by developing characters to represent different parts of their inner-self. Spalding Gray is a person belonging to this category for he performs monologues about his life and experiences. Gray's performances are different than Conquergood's in that Gray is an insider, performing aspects of his own culture, and Conquergood is an outsider, performing aspects of a different, or unknown, culture. Conquergood must devote much time to "becoming" a member of the community that he wishes to research/perform. He must "step into" the culture in order to gain perspective. Gray, on the other hand, is already a member of the community that he wishes to perform. He must "step out of" the culture in order to gain perspecitve.

A method of ethnographic research is used to gather information and report on societies other than one's own. This method helps the researcher "step into" the culture under investigation. However, sometimes it is necessary for a performance artist to distance himself from the event in question. By adopting some of the methods used by ethnographic researchers, the performer can "step out of" his own culture, providing the necessary distance for the reporting of

the event under investigation. Before demonstrating the ethnographic qualities used in the preparation of a solo performance piece, it will be necessary to define both ethnographic research methodologies and the different types of solo performance.

Ethnography

Ethnography is a descriptive form of anthropological research that arose out of man's desire to inform others about peoples from other cultures. "The more specific origins. . . lie in the writings of travellers concerned to inform their fellows about other societies" (Hammersley 2). In terms of sophistication, ethnography is rather primitive when compared to the more technical forms of data collection--the survey or experiment, for example. Ethnographic research began when a scholar documented what he saw during his travels or during the travels of others. Of course, due to the very nature of reporting the information, the data was seldom consistent or accurate.

It was during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that social and cultural anthropologists decided that it was time to gain a better grasp on the research methodology. No longer would they rely on the impressions of others. These anthropologists would conduct the research themselves and do so in a more "systematic and rigorous manner" (Hammersley 2). The artifacts and information gathered about the foreign culture would be collected through visits, and often extended stays, of the researcher. The researcher would, in effect, be standing within a culture while at the same time standing outside of it (Stern 47).

According to Martyn Hammersley, in his book Reading Ethnographic Research (1990), ethnographic research is one that is comprised of the following features;

(a) People's behaviour is studied in everyday contexts, rather than under experimental conditions created by the researcher.
(b) Data are gathered from a *range* of sources, but observations and/or relatively informal conversations are usually the main ones.
(c) The approach to data collection is 'unstructured' in the sense that it does not involve following through a detailed plan set up at the beginning; nor are the categories used for interpreting what people say and do pre-given or fixed. This does not mean that the research is unsystematic; simply that initially the data are collected in as raw a form, and on as wide a front, as feasible.
(d) The focus is usually a single setting or group, of relatively small scale. In life history research the focus may even be a single individual.
(e) The analysis of the data involves interpretations of the meanings and functions of human actions and mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at most. (2)

From the qualities listed above, it is evident that ethnographers gather data about a given culture from the stand-point of participant/observer. The researchers participate within the culture

by immersing themselves completely into it, while at the same time, because he is not a member, is destined to remain an observer.

After the information is collected, it is up to the ethnographer to develop a method of communicating the data and informing others of his discoveries. This is not always an easy task, for the researcher is concerned with informing others about this culture through the words of those belonging to the culture;

> In selecting a manner in which to report about another culture and navigate between different cultural practices, different political systems, and different institutions, the ethnographer has to settle on a strategy or multiple strategies by which to represent the other culture and the multiplicity of voices that are comprised in it. (Stern 42)

Many ethnographers are choosing the performance medium through which to report their findings. An ethnographer can focus on the performative aspects of a given culture, such as everyday conversation, oral histories, or political or religious ceremonies. Because ethnography is a descriptive method of social research, what better way to describe and gain a better understanding of an unfamiliar culture than through the words and actions of its own peoples? The ethnographer compiles the conversations and personal narratives of the society and proceeds to perform the information learned. Stern and Henderson state that

> The goal of ethnographic description of performance traditions is not an objective understanding of another unknown or little known culture and its performative practices. Rather, it is a subjective understanding, derived from a variety of voices, of the ethnographer's desire to experience and interpret other cultures. (51)

Therefore, ethnographers are aware of the subjective element of their work and do not attempt to mask it, but rather recognize it for what it is and incorporate it into the reporting/performing of the culture.

> What the ethnographer is in fact faced with. . . is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render.(Geertz 10)

The job of the ethnographer, then, is twofold. He must first be able to recognize the "conceptual structures" of the culture and "grasp", or understand, them. Second, he must be able to "render", or perform, them in an attempt to educate others about a little known culture.

Dwight Conquergood is an ethnographer who has adopted performance as the medium through which to present his research. He spent several years living among the Hmong refugees in Chicago. He considers ethnographers communicators instead of scientists and

prefers performance because "although ethnographic fieldwork privileges the body, published ethnographies typically have repressed bodily experience in favor of abstracted theory and analysis" (Rethinking 181). While he was completely immersed within the culture, and oftentimes recognized as a member, there still remained an element of distance to Conquergood's research. He indicates that this distance was created by the acknowledgement of the necessity to maintain separation in order to observe and record the culture;

> Sight and surveillance depend on detachment and distance. Getting perspective on something entails withdrawal from intimacy.. . . Being "too close" is akin to losing perspective and lacking judgement. (Conquergood Rethinking 183)

He chose the performance medium through which to communicate his discoveries because of his desire to educate others about the repression faced by the cultures under investigation and because of his belief that bodily expression is an "intensely sensuous" way of knowing (Rethinking 181). He states;

> I have performed the stories of the refugees for dozens of audiences. In addition to academic audiences,. . . I have performed them before many and varied non-academic audiences. I have tried to bring the stories of the Lao and Hmong before social service agencies, high schools. . .,businessmen, lawyers, welfare case workers,. . .and so forth. (Performing 3).

Conquergood uses the methodology stated by Hammersley in that he studied the everyday behaviour of the Hmong people and used informal conversations as sources for a large part of the information gathered. His method of gathering the data was spontaneous and natural, centered around the Hmong people, and reported through a performance of the information gathered, as opposed to formal lectures and experiments. It is the use of performance as a medium for communicating the research that enables the ethnographer to also be considered a type of solo performer.

Solo Performers

Solo performers, in the theatrical sense, are not new to the genre. In fact, they have been around since the rhapsodes in early Greece. It has just been over the past fifty or so years that solo performers have begun, once again, to enjoy great popularity.

John Gentile, in his book Cast of One, credits the early platform readers with supplying the respectability and acceptance of this new style as a legitimate form of performance. Platform readers, such as Charles Dickens, Anna Cora Mowat, and Fanny Kemble, turned the public reading of a novel or play into a credible occupation. This form of entertainment was immensley popular for quite sometime, but, as with the styles of fashion, performers began to alter, however slightly, the art form of the one-person show.

As was stated earlier in the paper, the 1960s were a time of radical change for all aspects of society. Performance and theatre underwent permanent radical shifts as artists were discovering new ways to express themselves or support a cause. A new form of the

one-person show began to develop, under the heading of performance art. Performance artists, according to Stern and Henderson, "often play themselves-- their own personality or life--not a character, and both plot and narrative are handled in unconventional ways" (381). These events differ from the traditional one-person shows in that there is no specific text, no traditional theatre space, and no definite performer/ audience relationship. These events can occur anywhere, at anytime, for seemingly no reason. The performance artists oftentimes appear to be telling a story about themselves or no story at all, depending on the type of solo performance art event the artist prefers.

Stern and Henderson, in their book Performance: Texts and Contexts (1993), define three specific types of solo performers (412-429). The first type is considered "living as character." The example used by Stern and Henderson is performance artist Eleanor Antin. Antin created specific individual personae that represented different aspects of her inner-self; the King, the Ballerina, the Nurse, etc. During Antin's "performances" she would assume one of the personae--each having distinct personalities--and "live" as that character would. There was no set text or lines for her to deliver, for she would interact and react as the individual personae would. "She did not write a script or try to locate herself in the historical period of the King to whom she bore a resemblance, [but instead] improvised contemporary life in the persona of her King" (414). In essence, then, Antin used the performance of the personae to explore various aspects of her inner self. This differs from the

second type of solo performance artist defined by Stern and Henderson, the dramatic monologist.

Whoopi Goldberg is the example used to describe the type of artist who utilizes the dramatic monologue to express herself. Goldberg, like Antin, also developed specific personae that represented her, but she did not "live in character". For Goldberg, there is a definite monologue that accompanies each personae. These monologues, aside from slight revisions, are typically unchanging from performance to per- formance. During Goldberg's performance, she moves from character to character, delivering the monologue belonging to that individual character. Her performances more closely resemble that of the one-person show, but the source of text is from self and not a literary form.

The third type of performance artist is that of the auto-performer. The autoperformer performs his own life. He does not assign aspects of his life or inner-self to different personae, but shares life stories with the audience. This autobiographer performs personal narratives of his own life. Richard Schechner explains autoperformance thus, "[not] monologues in the traditional sense of a one-person show, but in the more radical sense of using the one person who is performing as the sourse of the material being performed" (Humanism 44). Spalding Gray is an apt example of an autoperformer. He uses personal narratives as the source for his performances. Gray and Dwight Conquergood are similar in the sense that both use personal narratives and everyday conversation as material for their performances. Both share the common element of

performance, but Conquergood's narratives are not from his own life, but those of a different culture. It is because Conquergood's narratives are not from his own culture that enables Conquergood to be considered an ethnographer. However, upon examining Gray's work it is apparent that he must adopt much of the same technique that Conquergood utilizes as ethnographer when constructing his own autoperformances.

Gray As Ethnographer

Spalding Gray as a performer played an important role in avant-garde theatre of the 1960s. He worked closely with Richard Schechner and the Performance Group and then developed his own company, which is still in existence, the Wooster Group. As a solo performer, Gray developed monologues describing past experiences which became immensley popular and succeeding in establishing himself as an auto-performer. Since that time, he has developed numerous monologues that explore various aspects of life. Sex and Death to the Age 14, Booze, Cars and College Girls are only two of the many that have pushed Gray to the front of performance artists. Probably considered his most famous monologue, Swimming to Cambodia, describes Gray's experiences working on the film The Killing Fields, in which Gray had a minor role.

In terms of preparation, Gray considers his complex weaving of social and personal history as "poetic journalism" (Gentile 150). In effect, Gray becomes a reporter in that he becomes the "'observer-of- events', who is Spalding Gray the private citizen, work[ing] in a

nearly reportorial fashion to uncover the system's shortcomings as he lives the life of a privileged middle-class male" (Demastes 86). He does not, however, report the events of those around him, but considers them as they occur to him--his experiences in the form of personal narratives.

It is the use of personal narratives that create the obvious similarities between Gray's work as solo performance artist and Conquergood's work as ethnographer/performer. Conquergood, by definition as ethnographer, attempts to inform his own culture of the repressed lives of others. Gray, as autoperformer, on the surface is performing personal narratives as a form of entertainment. However, the similarities between his method of preparation and those of an ethnographer would indicate that he, too, is attempting to inform his own culture, but this time about themselves. His performances may appear to be strictly forms of entertainment, but Gray is actually making social, and sometimes political, commentary on his society. As Demastes states, "while Gray's work may *appear* supportive of the status quo, it presents a persona who ironically utilizes an empowered naivety to undermine itself and the authority it seems to uphold" (86). Through his own personal narratives, Gray is able to adopt ethnographic methodologies and "research" his own culture.

As noted earlier, an ethnographer studies people's behaviour in everyday contexts, rather than under experimental conditions created by the researcher. During the filming of The Killing Fields, Gray kept a journal of his daily experiences, which then became the source for his monologues. An ethnographer uses a host of sources for his

inform- ation, but the primary sources are conversations and observations, which was what was noted in Gray's journal. The approach to collecting the data is 'unstructured' and the focus is limited to a single setting or group; Gray's observations and conversations occurred naturally and centered around his experiences filming the movie. Finally, an ethnographer analyzes the information through interpretation and description and communicates his discoveries through verbal description and explanation. Again, this is very similar to what Gray does in his autoperformances; therefore, it is apparent that Gray's methodologies in preparing his performances are very similar to those of an ethnographer when gathering data for his research.

Ethnographers must also consider the necessity of maintaining objectivity when reporting the events. This can be difficult because the researcher is at once inside the culture and outside of it. An ethnographer can never be completely within a culture unless it is his own; therefore, there will always be an element of objectivity to the research, despite the fact that interpreting the data adds an element of subjectivity. How, then, can Spalding Gray achieve objectivity when he is collecting data on his own life and culture?

In order for Gray to be able to comment on his own society through his personal narratives, he would need to distance himself from the subject. Through his idea of "poetic-journalism" Gray achieves the distance necessary to gain perspective of his life. In Gray's own words,

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> . . . I like to think of myself as a kind of "poetic reporter," more like an impressionist painter than a photographer. Most reporters get the facts out as quickly as possible--fresh news is the best news. I do just the opposite. I give the facts a chance to settle down until at last they blend, bubble and mix in the swamp of dream, memory and reflection. (Note xvi)

Because Gray gives the facts time to "settle down" he achieves the perspective on the events as they were recorded. The meaning of the events is discovered through memory and reflection, a step in the process of conducting research that is absent from the work of Dwight Conquergood. Conquergood performs the narratives as recorded during the interview. Meaning is instilled through Conquergood's inflection of voice and use of body--also used by Gray--but without the necessity of the passage of time from research to performance.

Dwight Conquergood used ethnographic research in order to be able to "step into" the culture under investigation and gather data about the culture. However, despite the fact that ethnograhy, by definition, is used by researchers in order to learn about other cultures, it is apparent that this methodology is useful to a specific type of solo performance artist when attempting to "step out of" and gather data about their own culture. Spalding Gray's autoperformances contained a subtext which turned his seemingly entertaining life stories into social commentary on his own culture. Just as ethnographers are using performance as an outlet for their research, some performers are adopting ethnographic techniques used

in the preparation of their own performances. Gray, although unconsciously, used ethnographic methodologies when preparing his monologues. He found it quite helpful and necessary to distance himself from his work by allowing several months to pass before attempting to perform the narratives. By allowing time to pass, he was able to "step out of" his own culture and gain the necessary perspective. Through the works of Spalding Gray, it becomes apparent that ethnography should not be considered strictly in the anthropological sense. This type of research methodology is defined as one that is used to learn about other cultures; however, when used properly, it can reveal much about our own cultures through the performance of self.

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